This is Miyamoto. And it's Nintendo's world.

With a third theme park open in Orlando, the legendary creator of Mario, Zelda and Donkey Kong has made his playful dreams into a global empire.

Today at 8:00 a.m. EDT

Shigeru Miyamoto, a top executive at Nintendo and creator of Mario, The Legend of Zelda and Donkey Kong, at the opening week of Universal's new theme park Epic Universe in Orlando. (Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

10 min 3

By Gene Park

ORLANDO —

Shigeru Miyamoto wanted to share what he calls "a little bit of a strange story" as he sat in a lavish and hushed lounge tucked in the middle of Universal Orlando, where the third Super Nintendo World theme park opened Thursday.

Now 72, the most influential creator in the video games art form has come a long way from his youth as an industrial design student at the Kanazawa College of Art, a tiny public school. He was a lifetime and a world away in Florida to open another theme park he helped design, but for a moment, his memory traveled back to his college days to rediscover the first time he built a world to enter and play.

"I thought I would create a toy that helps kids learn how to count," Miyamoto told The Washington Post through an interpreter. "There's all these pieces laid out on the table, with things like poles or cubes you would drop in. But in addition to that, what I did was then take that toy set and expand it so that you can actually walk into it. That was all part of my graduation project.

"Fast forward to now, looking at the 8-bit game and seeing this world that we've been able to branch out, I really see a little bit of synchronicity in that experience. I find myself thinking that I'm doing the same thing. … I really feel like my interests are still fundamentally the same."

Miyamoto created the original Mario, Donkey Kong and Legend of Zelda games, the foundations of the 135-year-old Nintendo's rebirth as a video game company. Nintendo and "Super Mario Bros." are often cited for rejuvenating the industry after the video game crash of 1983, when the nascent industry imploded after a flood of poor quality products. His attention to quality control and play formed the nucleus of countless video game genres and lifted the industry out of recession and into one of the planet's dominant entertainment mediums.

The "overworld" of Super Nintendo World. (Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

TOADSTOOL
CAFE

(Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

(Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

Actors in Mario and Luigi costumes interact with park guests at Super Nintendo World two days before the public opening of Epic Universe. (Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

His imprint on the medium is immeasurable. In 1998, he was the first person inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame. In France, he was honored as a Knight of Arts and Letters. In Spain, he is the first video game creator honored with the Princess of Asturias Award. In 2019, he was the first game creator to receive Japan's Person of Cultural Merit award.

Now he is one of the few people to have theme parks built from his creations. Just as one could walk around the Jurassic Park world of Orlando and hear John Williams's iconic score, Super Nintendo World echoes with the indelible jazz pieces of Koji Kondo's Mario themes. Even the bathrooms play the water-level waltz of the classic games.

"I don't think in a million years when he was sketching out Donkey Kong and Mario … that he would've ever imagined they would be a centerpiece of a major international theme park," said Roger DiLuigi, a 35-year-old content creator from Los Angeles with more than 550,000 subscribers on his Nintendo-focused RogersBase YouTube channel. The lifelong Nintendo fan was among hundreds of influencers and creators invited to cover and promote the Orlando Epic Universe launch. "And yet here we are."

Today as an executive and representative director, Miyamoto's fingerprints are most evident in Nintendo's expansion to other mediums, including the Super Nintendo World theme parks, the billion dollar box office blockbuster Mario movie released in 2023 and the recently opened Nintendo Museum in Kyoto.

Nintendo's origins in the U.S. began with a lawsuit by Universal City Studios. In 1982, the media conglomerate sued Nintendo over Miyamoto's first hit game "Donkey Kong," claiming infringement on the

King Kong property. Nintendo hired veteran Washington, D.C.-based civil rights attorney John Kirby and won the case. Nintendo would honor Kirby, who died in 2019, by naming a character after him as thanks for helping the company regain foothold in the U.S. market.

Nintendo and Universal Studios announced their plans to partner in creating theme parks in 2015, with the first park opening in Japan in 2021. Universal's Epic Universe in Orlando, including Super Nintendo World featuring the Mario brand, is the first in the U.S. to include an expansion for Donkey Kong Country.

"The world really does work in mysterious ways," Miyamoto exclaimed, laughing. "It was really fun to be able to jokingly talk about what if we put Donkey Kong on the other side of King Kong in City Walk!"

DONKEY KONG
COUNTRY

Influencers and journalists explore the park. Orlando has the first Donkey Kong Country park in the United States. (Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

Guests hold up souvenir Donkey Kong cups. (Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

(Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

Nintendo’s decision to fight the lawsuit was seen as a sign that the company, and video games as a medium, had arrived. Miyamoto keenly remembers when people would look down their noses at video games.

“When I first created Mario, it was a time where Mom or Dad might look at their kids playing a video game and be worried, concerned about what’s going to happen,” he said. “I was expecting there will come a time when even the parent will have experience playing video games. That was something I was hoping to see. Now I’m over 70 years old, and we’re finally at a time where multigenerational families all have this common shared experience of having played video games. It’s really great to see that come to realization.”

His dream is fully realized. Millennial parents teaching their children the history of characters like Princess Peach or the villainous Bowser are as plentiful as the power-up blocks and green warp pipes that populate the park. Children squeal in delight riding through the immersive Donkey Kong mine cart ride that includes fake jumps and scares, much like the game it's based on, "Donkey Kong Country." Little girls crowd around to talk to Princess Peach with her wide set of recorded responses.

Robert Martinez Jr., the 43-year-old executive chef at the park's Toadstool Cafe restaurant, understands the generational love of Nintendo. He's a 25-year veteran of Universal Orlando, a job passed on from his chef father who worked at the park.

"It's surreal to see myself as a young kid with my Nintendo, blowing the cartridges as we all did back in the day, to being here. Nintendo as a brand touches so many generations," Martinez said. "It's something I can share with my kids today. In many cases, you probably know the IP way more than your kid."

Seeing those families enjoy the park is "something that really brings me joy," Miyamoto said. "At the same time, it makes me feel a little old too."

Miyamoto hasn't misplaced his youthful sense of play. During a photo shoot for The Post, Miyamoto struggled to offer a "business" face when posing. He couldn't help but crack cherubic smiles as he posed with his fists up like Mario.

SUPER
TEN
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RESORT

Miyamoto poses with a Mario punch up. (Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

That playfulness translates throughout the park, which Miyamoto helped design. Each visitor receives wristbands that keep score of activities and secrets discovered, including coins collected by punching blocks.

“I created this theme park with the hope that people will be able to experience Nintendo characters with their entire body,” he said. “There was a time where I was thinking, ‘I wish we could create an interactive experience where people can roll around and hang out.’ ”

Nintendo is a famously stubborn company. It started in the 19th century as a producer of playing cards and later as a toy company. Miyamoto’s work transformed its focus to video games and consoles, a formula it has strictly followed until recent years. It is the only major platform holder that does not publish its games in competing platforms, unlike PlayStation and Microsoft’s Xbox, which now both publish games on Nintendo’s Switch consoles. That strategy has helped keep Nintendo unusually profitable.

So for years, Nintendo was precious with its intellectual property, keeping Mario and crew away from multimedia projects, outside of the first attempt at a Mario movie, which was a notorious box-office bomb.

“Our thinking was that we don’t use characters in media other than games so we’re not limited or restricted when we create the next game,” he said. That freedom encouraged creativity: depicting Mario flying with a raccoon tail in “Super Mario 3,” or in the following game, riding the dinosaur Yoshi.

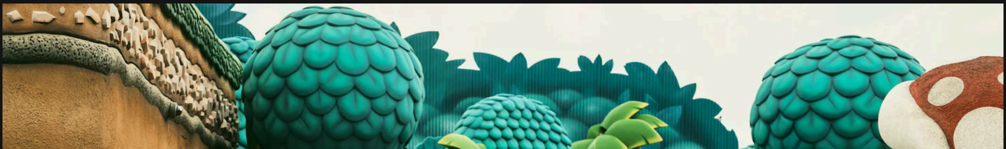
“Over the decades, that thinking has changed inside of me, in that I’ve come to realize there are limits to the reach that these Nintendo characters can have when we are just focusing on games,” Miyamoto said. “For example, there are countries where maybe there aren’t games available. It really translated into being able to expand through different media.”

POW
POW
ADVENT

(Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

(Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

The Toadstool Cafe offers Mario-themed food. (Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)



(Zack Wittman/For The Washington Post)

Miyamoto said he guided Universal on creating a more interactive experience that's approachable and family friendly, while keeping the spirit of his games. The puzzle series Pikmin, which began in 2001, is one of the last properties Miyamoto helped create, and it remains among his most beloved. The plantlike Pikmin creatures are meant to be ethereal and spiritual, and it was Miyamoto's idea to place them all over the park as part of a hide-and-seek game.

"When you look at characters like Mario or Splatoon, I made it a point to make sure they only exist within the IPs they are a part of, but Pikmin have this unique quality in that they can be right next to you as we speak," Miyamoto said. "They can, at least in my mind, interact and mingle with any kind of IP. I thought the easiest and quickest way to really convey what Pikmin is was to just drop Pikmin in that world."

The magnitude of Nintendo and Universal's achievement only hit Miyamoto when he walked out of the warp pipe and saw the park envelop him. It's the real-world equivalent of hero Link stepping out into the world of Hyrule in the groundbreaking 2017 Nintendo Switch game, "The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild."

"I've been obviously looking at everything from the schematic and planning stage," he said. "When it comes to finally taking the blocks we so painstakingly created and stacking those up, recreating Mount Beanpole, adding the moving Piranha Plants or Goombas and having them all synchronized together … and then walking out of Peach Castle and looking ahead at the world, that was when I found myself thinking, 'Wow.'"

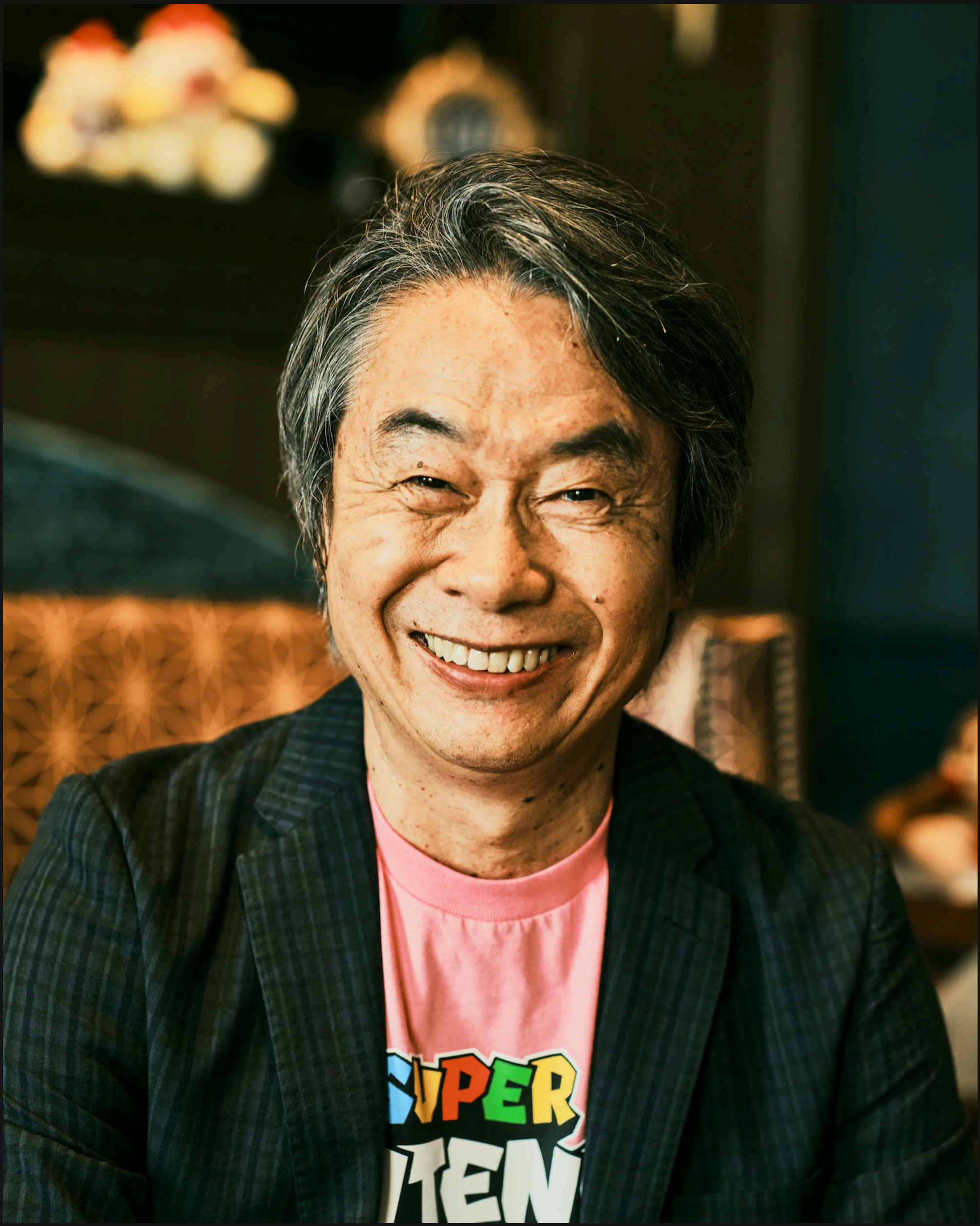
Despite Nintendo's expansion into other mediums, Miyamoto said it's important for the firm's employees to remember that they are entertainers. It's why he helped open the Nintendo Museum in Kyoto, not just as a visitor attraction but as a document to inspire employees.

"I wanted to make sure it's clear Nintendo isn't trying to compete with competitors as a game company, but as an entertainment company, looking for new technologies, to expand and create new experiences," he said.

Miyamoto said when it comes to his legacy, he's not sure if "satisfaction" is exactly the right word for it. His first real dream was to become a manga artist and storyteller.

"Through manga, I wanted to create a unique world. Obviously I didn't become a manga artist," he said. "But I really can't help but feel very fortunate that through my involvement with creating games, I've been able to expand that process to something like the theme park you see today."

It wasn't the road Miyamoto started on, but as he mused earlier, the world really does work in mysterious ways.



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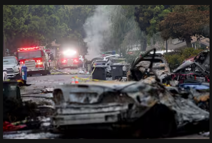

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